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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT

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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001551

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/02/2008

TAGS: MARR MOPS PREL TX

SUBJECT: CHARGE RAISES NORTHERN DISTRIBUTION NETWORK (NDN)  
WITH TURKMEN FOREIGN MINISTER: NO GIVE IN TURKMEN POSITION

REF: ASHGABAT 1533

Classified By: Charge Richard M. Miles for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Charge Miles raised the issue of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) with Turkmen Foreign Minister Meredov. Meredov listened carefully to Charge's points but then re-played the well-known Turkmen (negative) position on the issue. Charge emphasized that the issue was important and would not go away. Charge left a non-paper which, presumably, the Minister will share with President Berdimuhamedov. End summary.

¶2. (C) In a one-on-one meeting with Foreign Minister Meredov on December 1, the Charge drew on the NDN talking points prepared for TRANSCOM Commander General McNabb, s use during his visit to Ashgabat last week. Due to rescheduling difficulties the General had not been able to meet with either President Berdimuhamedov or Foreign Minister Meredov although he was able to meet with the Defense Minister. The Charge reminded the Foreign Minister of Deputy CENTCOM Commander, Lieutenant General Allen, s previous visit to Turkmenistan as well as General McNabb, s more recent visit. He expressed General McNabb, s regret that he had not had the opportunity to discuss the NDN issue with the President or the Foreign Minister.

¶3. (C) The Charge noted the generally positive responses which General McNabb had received in other stops on his recent trip through the region. He then raised the key points which General McNabb had planned to raise, to wit:

- The importance of utilizing alternate routes besides going through Pakistan.
- The limitation to commercial, non-military cargo necessary for the re-building of Afghanistan, s infrastructure.
- Shipping was in the hands of various commercial shippers; in that required this cargo was no different than any other commercial cargo transported through Turkmenistan.
- The Russian Government and other regional governments had no problem with such shipments.

The Minister, s Position

¶4. (C) The Minister listened attentively and then said, "You know our position." (Comment: Indeed, we do. End comment.) He then described in some detail the transit arrangements which the Turkmen Government was allowing the United States - some of which, he emphasized, were unique to the United States. The Charge said that we did appreciate the arrangements very much. (Comment: Neither the Minister nor the Charge mentioned the on-going fuel shipments. It was implicit in the Minister's remarks, but even in this one-on-one conversation, it was apparently better left unsaid. End comment.)

¶5. (C) The Minister then embarked on a lengthy description of Turkmenistan's policy of "Positive Neutrality." Addressees will have heard all this before. In the context of the NDN, in short, it seemed to involve hyper-sensitivity to expanded use of the ground line of communications. The Charge again emphasized the non-military, commercial aspect of the U.S. request but this made no perceptible impression on the Minister. The Minister even brought up the old chestnut of the wine shipment - labeled provisions - which, if memory serves, was destined for the use of the Italian contingent in Afghanistan. "How would it look," he exclaimed, "if it were known that Turkmenistan - a Muslim country - allowed a shipment of alcohol to Afghanistan - another Muslim country?" (Comment: The Charge refrained from commenting on what he had observed so far of Turkmen drinking habits. End comment.)

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What Next?

¶6. (C) The Charge described the Roll On-Roll Off facilities he had observed at Klaipeda in Lithuania and at Rostock in the former East Germany. How did the facilities at Baku and Turkmenbashi compare, he asked. Not as good, said the Minister. The Charge then described the railroad modernization projects which the U.S. Trade and Development Agency had funded in Bulgaria - fiber optic signals modernization, roadbed improvement, highway crossing material and provision of other needed and rather expensive equipment. He suggested that the U.S. could explore such possibilities for the Turkmen railway system. The Minister paid careful attention to this but was equally careful not to rise to the bait.

¶7. (C) The Charge said he understood the Turkmen position but that he wanted the Minister to understand the importance of this issue to the United States. He emphasized that the issue would not go away. General McNabb planned to return to make his case directly to the Minister and the President. Other ranking U.S. Government officials could be expected to raise the issue - as would the Charge - and CODEL Taylor (which had already been briefed to the Minister) would like to discuss the issue with Turkmen Government officials during their visit December 18-19.

And Not Only That

¶8. (C) The Charge concluded that - beyond a doubt - this was going to be a priority issue for the new Administration. He concluded by asking the Minister to re-examine the issue and to discuss it with President Berdimuhamedov.

Comment

¶9. (C) The Minister did not indicate his course of action but the Charge would be surprised if the Minister did not discuss it with his President. However, the Charge would also be surprised if there was an immediate change in the Turkmen position. It might be possible to bring this desired change about. The Charge, having been here only two weeks, is reluctant to make a prediction. What does seem evident, though, is that we will have to grind away at this stone a

bit more before we achieve our desired result.

MILES